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ABSTRACT

An Australian study explored what teachers thought about working with students with disabilities and what kind of factors affected their practices. Twelve teachers from Box Hill Institute in Melbourne were interviewed using questions grouped into these four categories: background and experience, attitude, professional issues, and recommendations. Numerous findings were consistent with expectations; others confounded and surprised researchers. First, there was a distinct gap in the professional knowledge of teachers in dealing with certain disabilities and a significant information gap between institute policy, driven by government legislation, and level of teaching practice. Second, teachers needed to know how to be fair in their teaching practices where students with a disability were involved but without disadvantaging other students. Guidelines embracing the concepts of fairness, and the qualifying role of special needs and positive discrimination, were needed as part of the professional understanding of all staff. Third, teachers expressed these concerns about the assessment process involving students with a disability: fairness, whether a revised assessment measures competence, and time for assessment modifications. Fourth, the selection process was questioned because of the perception that technical and further education is obliged to take any kind of student, even where suitability for a course is doubtful. Recommendations include these: (1) get existing information into the hands of teachers; (2) develop guidelines on what's expected of teachers and support staff; (3) obtain information and training on disabilities, learning styles, and best practices; and (4) develop guidelines on allowable assessment variations (YLB)

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Teachers' needs in supporting students with a disability in the classroom: a research report

An introductory paper to some aspects of the report by G Eraclides and V Achia, May 2000, Box Hill Institute

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> The satisfaction of a teacher comes from the internal reward of seeing a student do something they've never been able to do before. When you unknowingly come up against a student who has a disability, and no matter how hard you've worked on the situation, in the end nothing gets through, then you realise there was something wrong and you should have recognised it and didn't - then it's a bit like being in the doldrums. I should have done better.

This quote more than any other encapsulates the predicament of a teacher working with a student with a disability. An experienced teacher feels frustrated for a number of reasons. He/she 'discovers' one of the students has a disability. The teacher tries to deal with it; realises the limitations of his/her knowledge and skills; the teacher fails. That teacher accepts he/she should have been able to do better. The traditional reward for the teacher is simply not there in this case.

Our research uncovered many such stories. Even teachers who believed they coped quite well felt they could do better given the right sort of assistance or resourcing.

In the overwhelming number of cases, teachers were committed to providing fair and high quality outcomes for all students irrespective of whether these students had a disability.

It is an indication of how educationally challenging an area this can be, where even with the best will in the world, and targeted assistance by specialists in the Institute, there can be failures leading to inadequate outcomes for a student and outright frustration for the teacher.

The method

The research was initiated by Box Hill Institute (Melbourne) at the request of the Disability Liaison Unit of the Institute, in order to find out what teachers thought about working with students with a disability and what kinds of factors affected their practices.

Box Hill Institute is a multi-campus facility in the eastern part of Melbourne, providing a very broad range of VET courses as well as various preparatory, VCE and specialist courses. Disability services are centralised at one campus in reasonable proximity to the others.

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Our method was based on the techniques of qualitative research. We spoke confidentially and at great length to 12 teachers in individual interviews. They were a balanced group in terms of gender, from various campuses and diverse subject areas.

We grouped our standardised questions into four categories:

- background and experience
- attitude
- professional issues
- recommendations.

Following the collation of the transcripts, a special meeting was held in order to address professional concerns and make recommendations. The full research report makes use of direct quotes in order to allow the teachers' own voices to be heard.

We deliberately did no research into disability policies and practices at the Institute, in order to minimise the effect of our prior knowledge at the interview stage. We were concerned to record the impressions and attitudes of teachers in as pure a form as we could.

The full report, as published by the Institute, accurately reflects the research process. No attempt was made to correct the grammar or amend the intensity of the language used.

Findings

There were numerous findings which were consistent with expectations and which add to previous research; then there were some which confounded and surprised us.

Teaching students with a disability is of course a challenge. It does require more time and effort. Teachers had little, if any, formal training in dealing with disability; they based their practice on whatever teaching experiences they previously had, the support of fellow teachers, and the assistance of the Disability Liaison Unit (DLU). The chronic shortage of resources in TAFE and the overall pressure to do more with less were cited as some of the reasons why teachers felt they did not do as well as they might. Combined with a sense that they do not fully understand the implications of a disability on the learning process, it therefore is to be expected that teachers are very concerned about the quality of their work.

Overwhelmingly, there was a belief that people with a disability belonged in TAFE by natural right, by the principles of social justice, and on the basis of fundamental human goodwill and a sense of welcome to all.

The commitment to quality and self-improvement was clearly in evidence, and most teachers believed that they were positively challenged by their experiences in teaching students with a disability.

Teachers found some kinds of disabilities harder to deal with than others (for instance those involving mental states); they needed a knowledge base on learning styles appropriate to different disabilities; and there were some problems in the

relationships between teachers and support workers. Ultimately, without the specialist help of the DLU, there would have been many teaching failures.

In this paper, I would like to concentrate on only four findings that contained a few surprises for us.

The information and knowledge gap

There was a distinct gap in the professional knowledge of teachers in dealing with certain disabilites. Teachers wanted information on an as-needed basis, about how to teach students with different disabilities. Whether this involved training, documentation, best practice examples, liaison with an educational expert, or fact sheets about different disabilities, it had to be timely and in a usable format:

> Whether it's a lack of maturity or a learning disability, I can't tell the difference ... that's the problem ... I don't have the expertise.

or

> I'd like to see every teacher who's involved with disabled students receive some background as to how we can best perform for that particular student.

More disturbing is that there seemed to be a significant information gap between Institute policy, driven by government legislation, and the level of teaching practice. This was revealed in a general way, by comments and recommendations made both during individual interviews and at the special meeting which was held.

The fact that teachers made many suggestions, some of which may be considered impractical, that were contrary to policy guidelines or were already in place - raises a general information issue for the Institute and its specialised agencies. People delivering services are in some cases not fully aware of what initiatives are being developed, or what the policy limitations, internal and external, are on the organisation delivering vocational education.

Clearly, what is going on at one level of the organisation is not getting through to another level that needs to know. Significantly, this level that needs to know in many cases does not even realise it does not know. Hence, we have teaching practice not fully informed by the reasons *why* certain things have to be done a certain way and why some changes (say in assessment procedures) *have to be made*.

This situation applied also to the way in which the DLU was understood to operate; for instance, many teachers were not sure what the guidelines were for the interaction of a support worker, a student and a teacher. The situation is possibly even more serious, when one considers the number of sessional staff that are now being employed, with limited (if any) induction processes. Teachers rely on what they think is reasonable, or what their informal mutual support system provides for them. Some of the implications can be seen in the next group of findings.

Classroom practices and discrimination

In the real world, how do you give equal opportunities to someone with a disability?

This was the fundamental question for many teachers. Even assuming the definitions of an equal opportunity policy are understood, how do you do it in practice?

Teachers wanted to be fair in their teaching practices where students with a disability were involved; but they wanted to be fair without disadvantaging other students. Fairness to all, as in:

> You can't be seen to be favouring a student with a disability. So any changes in teaching have to be to everyone's benefit.

After all, as teachers explained, other students that do not have a disability may be just as needy for a whole range of different reasons. They may have quite different levels of personal learning competence, problems with literacy or numeracy and unrecognised barriers to learning such as: emotional problems, past failures, lack of family support, poverty, poor language skills, or even a personally unacknowledged disability - a process of denial.

Because it was unclear to teachers how far they *should go* in supporting students with disabilities, they therefore used their own judgement and went their own way:

> ... they are just another student as far as I am concerned.

or

> You can't really teach to one person. I think you have to keep a balance of what you feel is the best way to present a subject to a group. After all it is not individual tutoring.

Some did the basics - and believed that was the fair thing to do - or they left matters to the support worker, or they treated everybody the same (after all, is not equal treatment the same thing as being fair?) Others went a great deal further, believing that students with a disability had a right to special treatment, and for some it was all about catering to individual differences anyway:

> I try to cater for them without making it obvious to anyone else. Maybe some people are entitled to more help than others.

or

> My responsibility is to inspire learning, and to recognise each student's individuality.

or

> ... the classroom is just an administrative concept, not a learning concept.

There were suggestions that a few attitudes were inappropriate and that some practices had not evolved to take into account the integrated classroom; there was even some conflict between support workers and teachers over classroom behaviours, and some teachers were not happy with the role of support workers in the classroom, particularly during the assessment process:

> Support workers sometimes tutor ... not sure what their role is. I thought it was just to take notes or interpret with sign language, but they seem to do more than that.

Discrimination, when it did take place, mostly occurred as a result of an earnest attempt to be fair - fair to all, as well as the student with a disability.

The possibility of being unfair to a student with special needs, when motivated by the best of intentions (being equal and therefore fair) - and not realising that by avoiding positive discrimination you could actually be unfair (hence unjust) - was surprising. Clearly, guidelines embracing the concepts of fairness, and the qualifying role of special needs and positive discrimination, should be part of the professional understanding of all staff.

Teaching practices that had seen better days were acknowledged by teachers, and they wanted the knowledge and skills to do better. Systemic problems, such as having to teach by lecturing to large numbers of students, in what is essentially a 'take it - get it - or leave it' approach, works against the most disadvantaged, and that usually means someone with a disability.

Assessment

Some teachers expressed a great deal of concern about the assessment process involving students with a disability.

A student is being assessed for competency in a subject area, but because of a disability they require some form of assistance or a modification to the assessment model used for all students.

Teachers were concerned, even angry, about how much help was being given to a student, believing in some cases it was not fair (as in overall fairness) and therefore inappropriate. However, they were not sure whether they could take action (see illustrative quote above). For instance, if a support worker prompts a student (and are they allowed to do that?), or the student just goes onto cruise-control while the support worker becomes a vital part of the learning process, contributing significantly to team-learning outcomes (assessable in some courses): is that fair?

> If the student uses the support worker correctly, that's fine. When they use them to slack off ... not happy with that. It has happened that the scribe is more involved in the class than the student, who is reading a novel!

How far should you go in changing the assessment model to accommodate a disability? Not very far in some trade areas - *not at all!*

> We don't dare put out a student that has not met the competencies required, disabled or otherwise (eg a procedure about testing a live circuit). Errors on the job cost lives!

In other areas it is not so clear that a revised assessment does in fact measure competence. Of course, it all goes back to how clearly the CBT process has been carried out (for instance, how well definitions of outcomes have been articulated); but the reality is that in a lot of courses ambiguity exists, and in some cases (for instance, preparatory courses) there is a great deal of slack: is a student with a disability considered compe ent if they type up an A4 document to a particular

standard, and they do it with no errors - but it takes them two hours to do so? How about if they are prompted by a support worker or assisted if there is a glitch with the computer?

If the student above thinks they are 'competent', when in fact they are far from being so by workplace standards, can that be a good thing? Questions like these were posed by some teachers, and there are no easy answers. Indeed, there seem to be no suggested guidelines or examples of 'best practice' with alternative models of assessment:

> That is the pressure put on us by the DLU [Disability Liaison Unit], to make us rethink ... which is helpful in some ways - to rethink what was done before - but there are limitations, and it does take time.

Teachers felt they were at times under pressure to modify assessment models (not in itself a bad thing if carried out properly) - but where is the time supposed to come from? How do you ensure the degrees of difficulty are consistent with what other students have to go through?

Teachers involved in assessment modifications end up having less time for other things, including helping students with a disability in other ways. In fact, as one teacher pointed out, in her subject area there were great difficulties with students that did not meet the assessable criteria of the DLU, yet they had other 'just below the threshold' problems that needed support (which equates to time). These students could not access any significant amounts of assistance. There are many such students, so what is fair after all?

Selection process

In the special meeting that was held after the individual interviews, the question of how students get to do what courses made a strong appearance.

From the special meeting:

> The attitude of TAFE, where there is a presumption that anyone can do a course, needs to be reviewed in the light of the changing standards which apply to education and employment.

There is a perception that because it is TAFE, there is an obligation to take practically any kind of student - even where their suitability for a course is doubtful. Some teachers believed the system should be far more rigorous, particularly when dealing with students with disabilities. This should be the case whether the students are coming through the normal year 11/12 processes, as pre-apprentices or apprentices, or through direct applications.

It is clear that people undertake courses for all sorts of reasons, and getting an employable skill is only one major reason; some people are only concerned to develop a skill (not reach an industry standard), or to interact with other people in a social setting. They do a course on the recommendation of family, friends, or even at the behest of a guardian agency. Yet teachers are generally required to teach all students to workplace competencies, with a job as the ultimate destination.

Most departments undertake some sort of interview as part of a selection process, but it was suggested that this process was not an effective filter. Nor was there sufficient (if any) advice to the teacher or potential student about what alternative courses or areas of personal development may be appropriate (perhaps with a community-based provider or some other TAFE partner).

A particularly striking example was given by one teacher of a student with a disability (Asperger's Syndrome) enrolled in a course requiring a great deal of social interaction and team work (part of the assessment process). When 'competent', this person will be working in an occupation where social interaction is the core of the work. After employing alternative assessment processes, this person has since passed through this course and enrolled in another subject area; it is doubtful he or she will work in the area of original study.

Again, from the special meeting:

> Better selection techniques will ensure that students can cope with the course content and the workplace their competencies will take them into.

While not wishing to seem to deny opportunities to anyone, teachers felt there should be some guidelines for teachers and potential students (and are there such guidelines or policies informing practice? See the above section on the information and knowledge gap), making it clear that a selection process worthy of the name exists; and disability is a factor (among others) determining whether an application can proceed.

Some teachers were not sure what was allowable under various Acts of Parliament or educational policies which regulate what opportunities exist for accessing TAFE. Our impression was that some teachers were not fully on top of the various social justice issues which form the foundations of policy.

Some recommendations

From just the few findings and comments examined above, it is clear that a great deal could be achieved by the timely provision of information, development of guidelines, and professional development intended to increase the knowledge base of teachers:

1. Get the information already in existence to the teachers, eg Government and Institute policies or procedures; and target new teaching staff.

2. Prepare and distribute guidelines as to what is expected of a teacher in the classroom and the use of support staff in classes and during assessment and in-services.

3. Get information and training on disabilities and learning styles; examples of best practice and an ideas database.

4. Prepare and distribute guidelines regarding allowable assessment variations and examples of successful practice and what criteria can legitimately apply

when selecting students; review selection procedures in line with Institute disability policy; and clarify any points of contention between policies and practices.

Some of the recommendations are already being addressed. The vital role of specialist units like the DLU, as a support to students and teachers, is beyond question.

The focus of any change should be on the teaching areas, where educators have an immediate impact on students. One of those areas is attitudinal. Consider the following: TAFE is seen as an area chronically under-resourced. It was a universally characteristic response on the part of teachers we interviewed to raise their eyebrows, conveying a mixture of cynicism and *if only* wistfulness, when asked to consider a world of adequate resources when making recommendations.

This may seem to be an amusing conditioned reflex of people in TAFE, until it is realised that one of the consequences will be people placing self-imposed limits on their ideas for change. Eventually people stop believing that worthwhile change is possible.

We had a feeling when we were completing our research that matters were finely balanced; there was still time to negate cynicism by taking advantage of some of the heartfelt suggestions for change. It is therefore a great encouragement to ourselves, teachers, and others working in the disability field, that some of the issues raised in the report are now being addressed.

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